

Goodbye to trout

Greenville Journal

8/22/08

The natural centerpiece of Upstate South Carolina is the Blue Ridge Escarpment. Each year anglers make over 100,000 trips to this beautiful setting to fish for mountain trout, the most noble of fishes. This fishery is one of the most outstanding in a state that has a strong passion for fishing. In fact, fishing is a \$1.5 billion industry in South Carolina, the 8th largest in the nation.

In My Own Words

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Trout are sentinels for water quality, requiring clean, clear, cold, oxygen-rich streams to thrive. Data from the Eastern Brook Trout Joint Venture indicate that when European settlers arrived, South Carolina had over 1,000 miles of streams harboring wild brook trout. In northern Greenville County, the North, South and Middle Saluda Rivers, the South Pacolet River and their tributaries all held "brookies."

Sadly, only a handful of headwaters streams in the state now support wild trout. Their decline is attributed to many causes, most of which are from human activities. In 1984, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources Board recognized the trout resource of South Carolina had already dwindled to only 250 miles. Twenty-four years later, development and less than ideal land management practices continue to destroy trout habitat.

The good news is that conservation organizations have been working for years to restore trout habitat and sustain the tradition of trout fishing. Local chapters of Trout Unlimited have been engaged in habitat improvement projects for decades. The Foothills Resource Conservation and Development Council has reached out to landowners to improve habitat, install coldwater releases in mountain lakes, and restore forested riparian buffers.

Also, hatchery-raised rainbow, brown, and brook trout have been used since the 1930s to stock streams suitable for a "put, grow and take" fishery.

Another critically important dimension of trout management is

preservation of thousands of acres of sensitive mountain environs. In addition to SCDNR's mountain lands programs, **Upstate Forever**, Naturaland Trust, and The Nature Conservancy, among others, have secured critical Blue Ridge lands for the future.

The bad news though is the good stewardship efforts are often offset by accelerating residential and commercial mega-developments with devastating impacts on trout streams. Bulldozers have stripped their forested buffers to re-sculpt the landscape for golf courses and resort homes. Paradoxically, while developers promote the pristine Blue Ridge environment as their chief selling point, the mountain landscapes are being radically changed, with predictable degradation of water quality, increased sediment, warmer waters, altered stream flows, decreased diversity, and fragmented habitat, all devastating to mountain trout.

Now comes what appears to be the "poster child" for this unfortunate transformation, a project called "Cliffs Mountain Park". What is unique about yet another Cliffs' golf course is that this one will criss-cross the North Saluda 25 times over a two-and-one-half mile reach. The course will have nine line-of-play shots over the river, and 16 bridges to get players back and forth.

Apparently, no golf course anywhere in the Southern Appalachian region so wantonly impacts any mountain river, much less a trout stream. No golf course anywhere has so many bridges. No golf course anywhere has nine playovers of public waters.

Cliffs could have chosen to buffer the river, put its 150-acre course elsewhere on its 5000 acres, and set an example of habitat stewardship. Instead, Cliffs asserts its "only option" was to zig-zag the course across the river and floodplain to "save" the forested mountainsides. That claim fails to mention the 1200 "luxury homes" on those sensitive mountain slopes, along with the infrastructure to service them.

This is a tragic story of a lost opportunity to demonstrate conservation stewardship, respect for our heritage, our public waters, rural values, and our quality of life.

Ben Gregg is executive director of the South Carolina Wildlife Federation.